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#### MISSIONARY COFFEE MORNING

A coffee morning organised by St. Peters and All Saints Missionary Guild will be held in the Court House on Wednesday, 6th November from 10.30 a.m. to 12.30 p.m.

Anyone wishing to see examples of work done in the parish for U.M.C.A. will be most welcome.

There will also be a 'Bring and Buy' stall.

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A MANSION WHICH HASTENED THE CASTLE'S RUIN

## Berkhamsted Place

PRESERVATION or deterioration? That was how the *Gazette* introduced a recent report on our famous and now unoccupied hill-top mansion, Berkhamsted Place.

Deterioration all too often leads to demolition, as we know from the loss of rows of half-timbered cottages at Northchurch, Gossoms End and Castle Street. But lovers of tradition score an occasional success. At Northchurch, ancient almshouses, completely modernised within, survive to gladden the eye and strengthen the heart and character of the village.

But who will come to the rescue of Berkhamsted Place? The last occupants moved out some months ago, and already vandals have shattered the windows, scattering glass over floors and garden. The town's oldest and historically most important mansion deserves a better fate than this.

#### MAINTENANCE COSTS

The difficulty, of course, is that old buildings need affection and heavy expenditure to keep them in good order. In its long history Berkhamsted Place has been severely damaged by fire, restored, altered, and neglected. Owners and tenants seldom stayed for a long period. Had they done so, they would probably have tired of costly repairs and replaced Elizabethan and Tudor masonry with mock-Gothic or something solidly Victorian in red brick. Even the man who built the mansion in 1580 did not live there for long; he leased it to his brother.

This is what Thomas Davis, a surveyor employed by the Duchy of Cornwall, reported in 1805: "The Mansion house called New House is still very far from a perfect state of repair. Mr. Rooper has done a great deal to the internal part of it, but some of the Stone Work, particularly at the East end, is now scarcely safe. The walls are old and ruinous and like most other old great houses require much attention."

#### FLINTS FROM THE CASTLE

That it was still known as New House more than two centuries after it was built is not surprising; many a New Inn is of great antiquity. To this day Castle Hill is crowned by Newhouse Farm,

though few people know it by that name. The mansion was also known as Berkhamsted House, and earlier still, as Castle House, an appropriate name for a country seat which was built partly of flints taken from the moated Castle. Berkhamsted Place has sometimes been called the daughter of the Castle; a greedy daughter, perhaps, to have hastened mother's ruin.

Middle-aged and elderly townfolk will remember when Berkhamsted Place and nearby houses and farm buildings stood in splendid isolation, forming almost a small hill-top hamlet. We were all walkers then, and a favourite approach was by the steeply rising lime avenue with views through the trees of open parkland on either side. Many of the trees survive, but not the pastoral views. If we chose to go by the road, now lined with houses, we passed no building between the railway bridge and the mansion other than Lord Brownlow's coach shed outside his private entrance to the station.

#### THAT SECRET TUNNEL

Viewed through tall iron gates, the mansion looked cold, important, and very, very private. We were always on the look-out for that celebrated but non-existent secret tunnel from the Castle to Berkhamsted Place, a favourite topic in years gone by. For good measure there was a ghost story with, of all things, a plausible explanation. Strange figures were seen in the snow-covered park when the sun shone, and crowds gathered by Lane's nurseries (now the Post Office site) to watch and wonder. It was an optical illusion known as Pepper's Ghost; a glass door swinging backwards and forwards caused distant reflections of people and objects on the snow.

In its old age, Berkhamsted Place is scarcely a glorious specimen of Tudor and Stuart architecture. Its inhabitants and visitors—princes, statesmen, royal servants, soldiers and farmers—are far more interesting to historians than the building itself. But the mansion is too important to be ignored or slighted, and I hope someone with enthusiasm and money will give it a new lease of life. I would like "Son et Lumière" performances to be staged there in 1966,

when we must do something dramatic to celebrate the 900th anniversary of an event which changed the nation's history—the submission of the English to William the Conqueror at Berkhamsted.

On your next visit, closely inspect the gateway. Like much of the mansion itself, the gateway walls are faced with flints and Totternhoe stone in chequers 7 in. square. On either side you will see the stone moulding of ancient windows.

#### THE OLD GATEHOUSE

These were the windows of a gatehouse, or porter's lodge, which was pulled down early in the 19th century. Probably built at the same time as the mansion in 1580, the lodge was certainly standing before the mansion was largely destroyed by fire early in the reign of Charles II. A document of 1650 states: "At the entering in of the house stands a porter's lodge, built with flints and Totternhoe stone... with four pinnacles at each corner, and in the middle standeth a light turret covered with blew slat with a payne on the topp of the same, which said turret doth much adorn the said house."

A watercolour from a drawing by Miss Dorrien in 1804, preserved at the British Museum, shows a two-storeyed gatehouse, with rooms above and on either side of the high gateway. A large clock adorned the bell turret. This building was probably demolished because it spoilt the view from the house. It was certainly a happy thought to save part of the wall, and no doubt the flints we see today were taken from the Castle.

#### REPAIRED BY JOHN SAYER

For a description of the mansion, I cannot do better than quote from *An Inventory of the Historical Monuments in Hertfordshire*, published in 1911:

"It is an E-shaped building, the wings projecting to the S.E., of two storeys with attics; the walls are of flint and stone, with brick additions; the roofs are tiled. It incorporates the remains of a courtyard house built by Sir Edward Carey, c. 1580, and sold to Henry, Prince of Wales, for whom the building seems to have been altered, in 1610.

"A fire, in 1661-2, destroyed nearly two-thirds of the house, which was afterwards repaired, probably by John Sayer, who held a lease of the property from 1662.

"On the S.E., the hall, built after the fire, occupies part of the old courtyard between the wings, and has a brick front with an embattled parapet, and a projecting porch with a four-centred, arched doorway.

"Below the drawing-room windows, also facing S.E., is a stone dated 1611, which probably refers to alterations made for Prince Henry, but is not *in situ*."

#### FAMOUS GUESTS

During a recent visit I was unable to find this dated stone. Walking through the rooms—there are over twenty of them on three floors—I admired a fine staircase, some panelled ceiling beams, and above all a richly carved oak fireplace, a striking feature as one enters the paved hall.

And what an attractive north-west front! This is almost in its original

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state, faced with flint and Totternhoe stones with two brick buttresses and two projecting octagonal brick chimneys which were added in the 17th century.

Looking across an overgrown lawn to tall trees in autumnal glory, I thought of Prince Charles (afterwards Charles II), the Duke of York (afterwards George V), Mr. Gladstone and others who had wandered in the grounds and stayed in the now empty mansion.

"BEORCHAM"

(To be continued.)

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